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ABSTRACT

Previous research has suggested that behavioral differences between shy and not shy persons may be explained by differences in inhibition rather than differences in interpersonal skills. To investigate the behavior of high and low social anxiety subjects in both ambiguous social situations and in explicitly structured ones, three studies using college students were conducted. Significant group differences were expected in the ambiguous but not the structured situations, indicating the group differences to be best interpreted as a difference in inhibition. In study 1, high compared to low social anxiety subjects were nominated significantly less often by their fellow group members as having generated humorous remarks during a group discussion task. However, in two structured situations comprising study 2, high social anxiety subjects generated cartoon captions and a comedy monologue that were equivalent in rated humorousness to those created by the low social anxiety group. This same pattern of results occurred in study 3, which investigated the dominance behavior of subjects in both a typical, ambiguous social situation, and in a structured one in which they were told to be as assertive as possible. High social anxiety subjects were rated as significantly less dominant than the low social anxiety group in the typical situation, but no group differences resulted in the maximal or structured situation. The group differences in the ambiguous situations were interpreted as showing a deficit in ability to initiate behavior sequences and/or the existence of motivation to avoid becoming the object of public attention. (Author/JAC)

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Social Anxiety and Performance in Ambiguous Versus Structured Social Situations

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Abstract

The results of three studies are reported that investigated the behavior of high and low social anxiety subjects in both ambiguous social situations and in explicitly structured ones. Significant group differences were expected in the ambiguous but not the structured situations, indicating the group differences to be best interpreted as a difference in inhibition rather than interpersonal skills. In Study 1, high compared to low social anxiety subjects were nominated significantly less often by their follow group members as having generated humorous remarks during a group discussion task. However, in two structured situations comprising Study 2, high social anxiety subjects generated cartoon captions and a comedy monologue that were equivalent in rated humorousness to those created by the low social anxiety group. This same pattern of results occurred in Study 3 which investigated the dominance behavior of subjects in both a typical, ambiguous social situation and in a structured one in which they were told to be as assertive as possible. High social anxiety subjects were rated as significantly less dominant than the low social anxiety group in the typical situation, but no group differences resulted in the maximal or structured situation. The group differences in the ambiguous situations were interpreted as showing a deficit in ability to initiate behavioral sequences and/or the existence of motivation to avoid becoming the object of public attention.

Social Anxiety and Performance in Ambiguous

Versus Structured Social Situations

Recent reports by Zimbardo (1977) and Pilkonis (1977a; 1977b) have called attention to the interpersonal consequences of shyness (defined as a tendency to avoid social interactions and to fail to participate appropriately in social situations). As a first step toward developing training programs to help shy persons overcome social anxiety and social skill deficits, Pilkonis (1977b) investigated the verbal, nonverbal, and affective differences between self-reported shy and not shy persons. A number of significant group differences emerged. In a five minute unstructured interaction with a confederate, not shy compared to shy subjects spoke more frequently, allowed fewer silences, looked at the confederate more often and for longer periods of time, and reported more pleasant affect after the interaction.

Of equal interest, for present purposes, was the lack of significant group differences on two major outcome measures. First, shy and not shy people did not differ on the average length of their utterances once they began speaking. According to Pilkonis this result "suggests that a willingness to employ social skills may be at issue here, rather than a complete deficit of such skills" (1977b, p. 602). Secondly, in an additional experimental task requiring subjects to give a speech, the speeches given by shy persons were not judged to be poorer than those of not shy persons on any of the evaluative dimensions. Pilkonis concluded that "shyness seemed to be less relevant in the structured atmosphere of preparing and delivering the speech than in the unstructured interpersonal encounter..." (1977b, p. 604).

The purpose of the present reported research was to investigate further the proposal that the behavioral differences between shy and not shy persons in ambiguous social settings is better better explained in terms of differences in inhibition rather than differences in interpersonal skills. If performances on tasks having clear behavioral requirements and definite beginning points consistantly result in no group differences, implications for training programs directed toward people identifying shyness as a problem would follow.

The shyness construct employed by Pilkonis (1977a; 1977b) is conceptually very similar to the social anxiety component of self-consciousness described by Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss (1975). Both emphasize discomfort and reticence in social situations. Two examples of items from the Social Anxiety subscale of the Self-Consciousness Scale are "I don't find it hard to talk to strangers" (reversed scoring) and "It takes me time to overcome my shyness in new situations" (Fenigstein et al., 1975). In addition, Pilkonis (1977a) reported a correlation of .67 between his shyness measure and the Social Anxiety subscale. Furthermore, Pilkonis commonly employs social ansiety as the defining characteristic of shyness. One could conjecture that previously reported relationships between social anxiety and behavior directed toward avoiding evaluative attention from others (Turner, 1977; 1978a), should theoretically hold for individual differences in shyness also.

As one of the subscales of the Self-Consciousness Scale, social anxiety correlates minimally with the other subscales: .14 with the Private Self-consciousness subscale (habitual attendance to one's thoughts, feelings, and behavior) and .21 with Public Self-Consciousness, awareness of oneself as a social object (Fenigstein et al., 1975; Turner, Scheier, Carver, & Ickes, 1978). In addition, Social Anxiety has been reported to correlate .20 with Snyder's (1974) Self-Monitoring Scale; .12 with the Marlowe-Crowne Social

Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964); .23 with Mandler & Sarason's (1952) Test Anxiety Scale; and -.35 with the Morse and Gergen (1970) Self-Esteem Scale (Turner et al., 1978). The low magnitude of these correlations attest to the distinctive contribution of the social anxiety - shyness construct to personality assessment.

The present paper reports the results of three studies. Each was conducted to investigate issues other than the one addressed here. However, the experimental designs of these studies and the fact that social anxiety data had been obtained on all participants, allowed a reanalysis of the results by high and low social anxiety groups to have direct applications to the current problem. The first study reports the humor production of high and low social anxiety subjects in a typical, ambiguous group interaction task. In the second study subjects were given explicit instructions to produce humorous comments in two structured situations. The third study investigated dominance behavior in both a typical or ambiguous situation and in a structured situation in which subjects are told to be dominant and assertive. Based upon the results of Pilkonis (1977a; 1977b) it was predicted that low social anxiety subjects would generate more humorous comments and act more assertively in the typical or ambiguous situations than would the high social anxiety group. However, in the structured situations no group differences were expected. This pattern of results would support the proposal of Pilkonis (1977b) that the lesser output of high social anxiety (shy) subjects in social situations was due to inhibition "rather than a complete deficit of . . . skills" (p.602).

STUDY 1

This study investigated individual differences in the spontaneous production of humorous comments in a social situation (Turner, 1980). In groups

three to six, subjects discussed a problem requiring a consensus conclusion. It was predicted that the high social anxiety subjects would make fewer humorous comments than would the low social anxiety group.

Method

In a testing period during the first week of class subjects completed the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein et al., 1975). Eight to ten weeks later 101 students (59 females; 42 males) reported to the laboratory sessions in mixed sex groups of three to six. Subjects were seated around a table with cards bearing their names in front of them so that each name was visible to all participants.

Subjects were told that the experiment was an investigation of the kinds of conclusions that groups reached concerning a number of abstract problems. The problem actually employed was developed by Turner (1978b) and described a financially troubled school district. Subjects were to decide which four of eleven auxiliary teachers would be terminated due to lack of funds. Ten minutes was given for group discussion of the problem. A copy of the problem, a "group conclusions form" on which the four teachers to be terminated were to be listed, and a pencil were left with the group.

At the conclusion of the discussion period a group discussion report was completed which asked subjects (1) the name of the person or persons who made the most humorous comments, (2) the name of the group leader, if there was one; and (3) the person or persons who made the fewest comments.

The high social anxiety group consisted of 46 subjects scoring above the mean on the Social Anxiety subscale while 43 subjects scored below the mean, thus constituting the low social anxiety group. Responses to the three questions were analyzed separately. For each subject on each question the outcome measure was the proportion of group members who listed the subject's name in response to the question.

Results and Discussion

As predicted, significantly fewer group participants listed high social anxiety subjects than low social ansiety subjects as having made humorous remarks during the group discussion. The mean proportion of group members listing high social anxiety subjects as having generated humor was .09 compared to the .20 mean for the low social anxiety group ($F = 4.42$, $df = 1/93$, $p < .05$). High and low social anxiety subjects did not differ in the proportion of group members identifying them as the group leader ($F < 1$). However, members of the high social anxiety group were listed by a larger proportion of their fellow participants as having made the fewest comments; .27 compared to .12 for the low social anxiety group ($F = 5.94$, $df = 1/93$, $p < .02$). Although these two significant results are consistant with each other, the two outcome measures were only moderately correlated ($r = .26$, $df = 93$, $p < .01$).

These results imply that high social anxiety subjects not only generated fewer humorous comments, compared to the low social anxiety group, but they also generated fewer comments of any kind. This second result is similar to that reported by Pilkonis (1977b) for shy compared to not shy subjects. In that study, during the unstructured interaction with a confederate not shy people spoke more frequently than shy persons.

The fact that fewer group members listed high compared to low social anxiety subjects as having made humorous remarks might be due to members of the high social anxiety having less ability to generate humor or it might be an artifact of their reticence to make comments of any kind. Study 2 presents data relevent to this issue.

STUDY 2

In this study the wittiness of high compared to low social anxiety subjects was investigated under highly structured conditions. In both parts of the

study, subjects were clearly told to be as humorous as possible. After completion of a self-report measure of wittiness, the first task was to generate humorous captions for cartoons. The second part required the production of a humorous monologue (see Turner, 1980). If high compared to low social anxiety subjects are simply less able to generate humor, group differences should emerge on these tasks. However, if the less humor production for the high social anxiety group in Study 1 was due to a reticence to make comments of any kind, no group differences should emerge on these tasks, because of the clear demands and explicit starting points. Since no group differences between shy and not shy subjects resulted in the structured speech presentation of the experiment by Pilkonis (1977b), no group differences were expected on the current behavioral measures. However, previous to these tasks high social anxiety subjects were expected to rate themselves on the self-report measure as being less witty than the low social anxiety group. If high social anxiety subjects are inhibited from making humorous comments in unstructured social situations, they should base their self-report on their usual typical behavior rather than on what they are capable of doing.

Method

Subjects were 87 students (39 males and 48 females) who participated for credit points in an introductory social science class. In a group testing period during the first week of the trimester, subjects completed a battery of measures including the Self-Consciousness Scale (Fenigstein et al., 1975). Those scoring above the mean on the Social Anxiety subscale were designated as the high social anxiety group (N = 40) while those with scores below the mean made up the low social anxiety group (N = 39). Subjects reported individually for the experimental session which ran two to six weeks after the testing period.

A male and a female experimenter met subjects at the laboratory session. All directions were given by the experimenter of the same sex as the subject.

The procedure consisted of having subjects first rate the extent to which they considered themselves to be witty. The nine point scale was anchored by "not at all witty" under the lower rating points and "very witty" under the upper numbers.

As detailed by Turner (1980), subjects were then seated at a covered table and told that the first part of the experiment involved the ability to supply humorous captions for cartoons. Their task was to generate witty captions for as many of the cartoons as possible in the allotted five minutes. It was emphasized that scores on the task would be based not only upon the number of cartoons captioned, but also on the wittiness of the captions.

After answering any questions, the experimenter removed the table cover revealing 12 single-frame cartoons attached to larger sheets of paper. Subjects were to write their captions under the cartoons. The experimenters left the room after reminding the subjects of the five minute time limit.

At the completion of this session subjects were led to another table and told that the second part of the experiment was a test of their ability to generate humorous routines similar to those performed by Jonathan Winters, Johnny Carson, and Richard Pryor. On the table were 18 objects, such as a tennis shoe, a broken tennis racket, and box of crayons, which could be used as prompts. Subjects were to simply tell the experimenters about the articles while interjecting as many humorous statements as possible. They were told to "pretend that you are on stage and ... the program director has given you a three minute spot to show how witty you can be." If no witty comments came to them, subjects were told to simply describe the objects for three minutes. After answering any questions, a 30-second preparation period was given followed by instructions to begin the monologue.

At the completion of the three minutes or when the subject stopped, if before three minutes, each experimenter independently rated the overall wittiness of the monologue on a 0 - 3 scale: 0 = no humorous comments; attempts monologue but simply describes objects; 1 = attempts at being witty but with little success; tries to do more than simply describe objects; 2 = a few witty rewards but routine not a smooth flow of humor; 3 = a regular comedy routine with total monologue directed toward witty remarks.

The reliability of the two experimenters' ratings of the wittiness of the monologue was .89 (Turner, 1980). The outcome measure employed in all analyses was the mean of the two experimenters' ratings.

In the cartoon segment the outcome measures were the number of cartoons captioned and a rating of their humorousness. This rating was obtained from two independent raters who assigned a score of 0 - 3 to each captioned cartoon. On this scale 0 = not at all humorous; 1 = somewhat humorous; 2 = moderately humorous; and 3 = very humorous. From each rater a mean rating was calculated for each subject (interrater reliability was .60; Turner, 1980). The average of the two raters' mean ratings was the final outcome measure.

Results

As predicted, high social anxiety subjects rated themselves significantly lower on the wittiness scale than did the low social anxiety group ($F = 8.14$, $df = 1/77$, $p < .01$). The mean self-rating of the high social anxiety group was 5.26 (S.D. = 1.54) compared to the 6.19 (S.D. = 1.22) mean rating of the low social anxiety group.

Contrary to this significant difference in self-reported wittiness, on both the cartoon caption task and the monologue task, no significant group differences emerged. Compared to the low social anxiety subjects, the high

social anxiety group in these structured situations generated an equivalent number of cartoon captions ($\bar{X}$'s = 4.00 and 3.55 respectively; F = 1.83, df = 1/77, n.s.); received an equivalent mean humorousness rating for those captions (F < 1); and received an equivalent overall rating for the humorousness of their monologue segment (F < 1).

Discussion

Although high social anxiety subjects rated themselves lower in wittiness than did the low social anxiety group, in the highly structured cartoon and monologue segments they were able to generate humorous remarks equivalent both in number and rated wittiness to those of the low social anxiety group. Combined with the outcomes of Study 1 these results suggest that high social anxiety subjects are capable of generating humorous responses, but in ambiguous social situations (Study 1) are inhibited from making witty comments. Furthermore, the self-reports of the high social anxiety group mirror their typical inhibited behavior rather than what they are capable of performing.

In Study 3 the dominance behavior of high and low social anxiety groups was investigated in both structured and unstructured situations. One methodological difference, however, was that the same subjects participated in both segments.

STUDY 3

The data reanalyzed for this study were collected as part of an investigation of the effects of psychological masculinity and femininity on typical and maximal dominance expression in women (Klein, 1978). Subjects were administered the Self-consciousness Scale (Fenigstein et al., 1975) during a pre-experimental testing period in addition to other self-report measures. As in the previous studies, it was expected that high social anxiety subjects would act less dominant than the low social anxiety group in the typical or ambiguous situation;

however, in the maximal or structured situation no group differences were expected.

Method

Subjects were college females and consisted of 51 low social anxiety subjects (scores below the mean on the Social Anxiety subscale) and 55 subjects with scores above the mean (high social anxiety group). The experimental procedure was adopted from Turner (1978b) and will only be summarized here.

Upon reporting individually for the laboratory session subjects were greeted by an experimenter who explained that the other two subjects participating in the session were already present (both were confederates). In the laboratory room everyone was introduced and seated around a desksized table.

The experiment was then described as an investigation of how groups solve rather abstract problems. Subjects were read the problem and given 10 minutes to arrive at a group conclusion.

The problem described was the one used in Study 1 which involved a school district that must dismiss four faculty members in specialist areas because of financial difficulty. Twelve teachers (reading specialist, drama teacher, assistant band director, etc.) were listed from which the group was to choose four to dismiss.

After reading the problem and reminding the subjects of the ten minute limit the experimenter left on the table a copy of the problem, a "Group Conclusion Form" on which to list the dismissed teachers, and a pencil.

The confederates' behavior was primarily composed of presenting both pro and con arguments as to which specialists should be dismissed. They were democratic in their approach and only moderately assertive.

At the end of the ten minute period, the experimenter returned, collected the Group Conclusion Form, and told the group that he would like to get their individual reactions to the group process. As the first to be questioned, the

subject was asked to accompany the experimenter to an adjacent room. The other group members were to be queried subsequently. In the adjacent room the subject completed an Evaluation of Group Members Form. During this time the confederates independently rated the dominance behavior of the subject on the following rationally constructed scale (Klein, 1978, adapted from Turner, 1978b):

1. No dominance statements--totally passive.
2. Statements of a general nature (comments, statements of fact, clarifying statements); a few very weak opinions voiced with little conviction or involvement.
3. A few opinions offered; no disagreements with others expressed. May agree with others' opinions.
4. Opinions offered but no attempt to lead group (or very weak one); disagreements subtle and nondirect. Might offer suggestions about organizing.
5. Opinions offered with attempts to get some agreement from others; somewhat persuasive efforts toward other member. Statements solicitous of support, such as "don't you think ....?" An organizer--democratic--asks what others think (How do you feel? How about ....? What do you think?).
6. Strong attempts to persuade others and open disagreement with others. Emphatic statements, such as "I think....". Person may take a while to warm up, but takes over eventually. Assertive about opinions; leads; not too concerned about what others think.
7. Complete usurpation of leadership of group with insistence upon influencing conclusions of group. Usurpation of leadership from the beginning. Strong opinions; not democratic; very persuasive; strong disagreements.

The subject was then told that in the second part of the experiment he/she would be working with another group of people on a problem similar to the previous one. However, in this situation the experimenter said:

> In this group, I want you to try to be the leader. I want you to be as dominant and assertive as you can be. This is an ability test.

The experimenter then stated that the two other students (confederates) in this part were ready to begin. As they walked to the second laboratory, the experimenter stressed the ability nature of the assessment.

This maximal or structured situation was set up similar to the typical situation. After introducing everyone, the experimenter read the same directions as before. However, a different problem was introduced. The group was to decide which four of twelve people would be selected to go into a fallout shelter to be saved from an imminent nuclear attack. Among the twelve choices were a 26-year-old lawyer, a 75-year-old priest, a 30 year-old black militant, and a 12 year-old girl with a low I.Q.

The experimenter followed the same method as before and left the room. The confederates' behavior was the same as that of the confederate in the typical laboratory. After ten minutes, the experimenter returned and followed the procedure of having the subject complete another Evaluation of Group Members Form while the confederates were rating the dominance behavior of the subject. The subject was then debriefed and asked not to dismiss the experiment with anyone until the study was completed.

Ten senior psychology students (five men and five women) rotated through the experimenter and confederate roles in the typical and maximal laboratory situations. However, the two confederates in the laboratory sessions were always of the same sex.

The school district and bomb shelter problems were counterbalanced for the typical and maximal laboratory conditions.

The data were analyzed via a 2 x 2 analysis of variance procedure with one between groups variable (social anxiety group membership) and one within subjects variable (typical and maximal laboratory sessions).

The interrater reliability for ratings of subject dominance behavior in the typical and maximal laboratory sessions were .94 and .95, respectively. The dependent variable from each situation was the sum of the ratings from the two confederates.

Results

The high and low social anxiety groups were expected to differ in their rated dominance behavior in the typical or ambigious situation, but not in the maximum or structured situation. Therefore, the critical analysis would be the simple effects of group membership at the two levels of the within groups variable (typical and maximal laboratory conditions.

The analysis of variance revealed significant effects for social anxiety group membership ($F = 3.98$, $df = 1/104$, $p < .05$) and laboratory conditions ($F = 79.98$, $df = 1/104$, $p < .0001$). The social anxiety group membership by laboratory condition interaction failed to reach acceptable levels of statistical significance ($F = 1.97$, $df = 1/104$, $p = .15$).

As predicted, in the analysis of the simple group effects, the mean rating of the low social anxiety group in the typical lab situation (8.50, S.D. = 2.58, n = 51) was significantly greater ($t = 2.43$, $df = 106$, $p < .02$; Kirk, 1968, pp. 266-280) than the mean rating of the high social axniety group (7.36, S.D. = 2.83, n = 55). Also consistent with predictions, in the maximal or structured laboratory situation the low and high social anxiety groups did not significantly differ ($\bar{X}$'s = 10.14 and 9.61, respectively; S.D.'s = 1.80 and 2.22, respectively; $t = 1.13$, $df = 106$, n.s.).

The main effect for laboratory conditions showed that the behavior of subjects in the maximal condition was rated as more dominant than was their behavior in the typical situation ($\bar{X}$'s = 9.88 and 7.93, respectively).

Discussion

In combination with the outcome of the previous two studies, the present investigation paints a consistent portrait of the high social anxiety person as one who in ambiguous social situations is reserved or reticent. Based upon the present results and those of Pilkonis (1977b) it would appear that for practically any behavior requiring verbal output in ambiguous social situations, high social anxiety persons will not match the production of low social anxiety people. However, it is also clearly shown in the present results that this group difference is not due to the absence of the skills necessary to perform the social behaviors (generate humor or act assertively) since no group differences emerged in the structured conditions of Studies 2 and 3.

As noted by Pilkonis (1977b) one possible difference in skills between the two groups would seem to be in the ability to initiate a behavioral sequence. However, this hypothesis assumes that the high social anxiety group would be as motivated to initiate the behavioral sequence as would the low social anxiety group, but is simply inhibited from doing so. Alternatively, it might be argued that the high social anxiety group actively chooses not to enter into social interaction. One possible benefit from this decision would be the avoidance of being the object of public attention (Turner, 1977). Due to ease of embarrassment and/or a history of social rejection, the high social anxiety person may speak less, generate fewer witty comments, and act less assertive in order to avoid public attention. Such an interpretation would not require the existence of a deficit in ability to initiate an interpersonal behavioral sequence, only a lack of motivation to do so.

From the present data it is impossible to determine which is the more accurate causal interpretation of the high social anxiety group's behavior. Both are mentioned by Zimbardo (1977) and Pilkonis (1977b) as points requiring therapeutic attention if greater conversational poise is to be developed. As stated by Pilkonis (1977b, p. 609): "Shy people, of course, balk at taking ... initiatives on their own, and adequate social skills training must provide both the techniques and motivation to overcome this reluctance." However, once the behavioral sequence is begun, the results of the present studies declare that the socially anxious or shy person has the skills to perform the desired acts.

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FOOTNOTES

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